A Processual Approach towards Studying Management Accounting Change

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Abstract

The issue of organizational change has assumed central importance in business and management—related research during the last two decades. Management accounting is no exception. Change in management accounting systems and techniques, the roles of accountants in business and, more generally, change in the shape of the finance function have particularly been the subjects of much debate in recent decades. This paper reviews two prominent approaches to change namely planned and processual approaches and concludes that a ‘processual’ approach provides a richer and more enhanced understandings of management accounting change.

Key words: change, management accounting, processual approach

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of organizational change has assumed central importance in business and management—related research during the last two decades. Particular attention has been directed at studying broad changes (e.g., technological development, mergers and acquisitions, the internationalization of markets, and the emergence of new competitors); although other studies have focused on the ways that organizations (re-)build their internal structures, strategies and cultures in order to adapt to, and shape, new (external) circumstances (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000).

Management accounting (MA) is no exception. Change in MA systems and techniques, the roles of accountants in business and, more generally, change in the shape of the finance function have particularly been the subjects of much debate in

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recent decades (see Burns et al., 2003; Yazdifar et al. 2008). These debates cover various issues including the extent to which these aspects of MA have not changed, have changed or should change. However, the way in which such changes, and other organizational changes, are achieved and the conditions of their emergence and, for many, 'success' has become a central question for organizational and management theory (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000). Organizations can and do experience severe problems in attempting to manage change effectively and the literature abounds with examples of change projects which have gone wrong, some disastrously so (Innes and Mitchell, 1991, 1995, 1996; Burnes, 1996, 2000; Yazdifar, 2004; Nudurupati, et al. 2011).

The organizational change literature suggests that certain intra-organizational groups have more scope for shaping business decisions (Burnes, 1996). Such research emphasises how power, politics and culture, can play a key role (though not necessarily being the only key factors) in driving and shaping organizational change (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973, 1985; Schein, 1991, 1992; Dawson, 1994; Buchanan and Badham, 1999). In the MA change literature, several recent studies suggest that such factors play an important part in either facilitating or hindering change and, thus, influence the evolution of MA systems and practices over time (e.g., Burns, 2000; Busco et al., 2000).

The multitude of difficulties associated with implementing organizational change have led some scholars to criticize one of the dominant perspectives on organizational change, namely the planned approach, as being “ahistorical, aprocessual, and acontextual in character” (Pettigrew, 1995, p.93). Business-related researchers nowadays are increasingly becoming interested in studies which regard context as being paramount, and which regard change as process rather than through a ‘snap-shot’ analysis of outcomes (Clark et al., 1988; Greenwood and Hinings, 1988; Dawson, 1994). ‘Process’ here means “a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context” (Pettigrew, 1997, p.338).

Recommendations to study (the dynamics of) processes of change, normally through longitudinal case studies, have also been made by several scholars in MA research (Hopwood, 1987; Soin et al., 2003; Sharma et al. 2010). They have argued that little is known about the processes of accounting change - that is, the forces which influence accounting change and shape different forms of accounting, and the consequences of such change. The aim of adopting a processual approach is thus to explore beyond (simplified) ‘rational’ accounting configurations; and to chart the dynamics which lead to outcomes but which cannot always be foreseen and may come unexpectedly (Burns, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to identify a need for studying MA change as process. In so doing, the paper first reviews some criticisms levelled against the planned approach to studying MA change and then discusses issues related to a processual approach. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows.

Section 2 below reviews the organizational change literature. Then, in Section 3, the meaning of “change” is explored and definitions made in the context of the present study. Section 4 then critically examines two conventional perspectives of organizational change – (1) the planned approach; and, (2) the emergent (or processual) approach. Section 5 sets forth an argument that a ‘processual’ approach provides a richer and more enhanced understandings of organizational change. Finally, concluding remarks are presented.
II. ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The management and techniques of organizational change would probably not be considered so important if products and markets were stable and, thus, the need for change was rare. However, such stability has never existed in practice, and change is consequently an ever-present feature of organizational life; though many would argue that the pace, scale and significance of change has increased over recent years (Burnes, 1996). The Chartered Management Institute (CMI)**, which regularly undertakes surveys of its members, reported that a majority of respondents’ organizations were experiencing major transformations.

Undoubtedly, the management of such changes and the adoption of suitable approaches have major implications for the way people experience change and on their perception of the outcomes. In several studies (e.g., CMI and UMIST studies, the latter undertaken by Ezzamel et al, 1994), managers appear to report considerable concerns about, and dissatisfaction with, the outcome of change (Burnes, 1996, 2000). They also comment that, as a result of recent organizational changes, their workloads have greatly increased, preventing them from devoting adequate time to long term strategic planning or to their own training and development needs. Moreover, the studies reveal that, while most managers support the case for change in their organization, many are anxious not only about the outcome of such change but also about the process of change itself (Ezzamel et al., 1994).

Thus, even the fact that change initiatives are well-established and planned, with a great deal of information, advice and assistance available is no guarantee of their success. This is perhaps why, in a survey undertaken by Hanson (1993), managers identified their ability/inability to manage change projects as the number one obstacle to the increased competitiveness of their organizations (Burnes, 1996, 2000). Organizational change, even on a small scale, can therefore be both complex and problematic.

Given the vast expanse of literature on the topic of managing change, it may appear strange that many managers have doubts about the suitable approach to change and the outcome of change (Ezzamel et al., 1994). Yet the reality, according to many academics and practitioners, is that organizations can and do experience severe problems in managing change effectively (Howarth, 1988). The literature abounds with examples of change projects which have either gone wrong or failed in practice (see Kelly, 1982a, 1982b; Burnes and Weekes, 1989; Cummings and Huse, 1989; Kanter et al., 1992; Burnes, 1996, 2000).

Change failure has also been a topic of considerable debate in recent MA literature (Baxter and Chua, 2003). For example, in a recent CIMA publication, Burns et al. (2003) report some case studies of change implementation. Their study describes both successful and unsuccessful changes in MA systems across several organizations. In one of the case studies, even the small scale change represented by introducing a new key performance measure was not implemented with complete success. The study reveals the complexity and path dependency of MA change processes and highlights the direct and important impact of the existing values and taken-for-granted assumptions within an organization on the success (or failure) of a programme of change.

In summary, organizations have been and still are changing radically. However,

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despite the large body of literature devoted to the topic of organizational change (and MA since 1990), and the many tools and techniques available to change agents, there is considerable disagreement regarding a “best way” to implement change. The diversity of perspectives on managing change can be examined from a number of schools of thought. Two such (dominant) approaches to examining organizational change and change management are the planned approach and the emergent (processual) approach.

III. THE MEANING OF CHANGE

The meaning of change is problematic (Kanter et al., 1992; Pettigrew, 1995; Quattrone and Hopper, 2001). Its definition is also avoided (Quattrone and Hopper, 2001). Goodman and Kurke (1982) argue that the first difficulty in any discussion of change is to identify the object of study. However, change is crucially determined by one’s perspective(s). For example, as Morgan and Sturdy (2000, p. 766) argue, according to the logic of ‘triallectics’, there are no ‘things’ in the world (which change) other than change or movement - it is not so much that everything changes, but that everything is change. From this viewpoint, people, organizations, ideas etc. are abstractions of movement - temporary, identifiable ‘resting points’. Kanter et al. (1992) take a less abstract view and suggest that stability is unnoticed change. While such positions rightly challenge the focus of traditional organizational theory on explaining and/or achieving stability, the question of what counts as organizational change is still meaningful (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000).

Some academic studies have tried to overcome the ambiguity regarding the nature of organizational change by distinguishing between ‘rational choice’ and ‘institutional pressures’ for change. Quattrone and Hopper (2001), for example, identify two views regarding organizational and MA change. Explaining these views, they state: “studies based on individuals’ rational choice imply that change flows from purposive actions in accordance with an objective, external reality whereas contextualism argues that change results from institutional pressures, isomorphisms and routines” (p.403). They argue that both views depict change as the passage of an entity (e.g., organizational or accounting practices), from one identifiable and unique status to another.

In contrast, some researchers have contributed to the debate on the nature and extent of organizational change by distinguishing between two main types of change process (see Dunphy and Stace, 1988). The first type refers to some kind of ongoing change which is seen as necessary for any organization to adapt to what is going on in its own environment. March, for example, comments that ‘organisations are continually changing, routinely, easily and responsively’ (1981, p.563). However, it is often claimed that this level of change is superficial or ‘skin-deep’ (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000). The analogy being, according to Morgan and Sturdy (2000), that the organization possesses ‘character’ in a way similar to that which may be claimed of the individual subject. Surface changes, therefore, do not necessarily change what lies underneath, the ‘character’ of the organization. Some writers use a variety of terms to refer to this ‘character’ such as ‘organizational culture’, ‘the set of assumptions’, ‘norms’, ‘values’, ‘taken for granted assumptions’ and ‘beliefs’ which underlie actions and structures and provide the framework within which these are constructed (see Ott, 1989; Bate, 1994). Others, for example Greenwood and Hinings (1993), have developed the argument to link aspects of organizational culture to systems and
processes, and prefer to analyse the totality in terms of 'configurations' or 'archetypes' (see also Miller and Friesen, 1984; Meyer, Tsui and Hinings, 1993). From this viewpoint, much of the change which occurs in organizations does not fundamentally alter the culture, configuration or archetype; but is absorbed or dealt with by the existing patterns of arrangements; so that there is no fundamental break, but rather a process of development (Bate, 1994; Morgan and Sturdy, 2000).

Morgan and Sturdy (2000) argue that classifying change even in a simple way gives vague results. Kanter et al. (1992) comment on the ambiguity of the definition of change and argue that the point of view of those who think they are creating change may be different from those who will be affected by it. For Dawson (1994, p.10) change in an organization is “any alteration in tasks or activities”, but he also views change as an ongoing process which can be both progressive and regressive with each having intended and unintended consequences.

Likewise, the concept of change in the field of MA is also problematic (Quattrone and Hopper, 2001). There is no common and exclusive definition of change. However, the meaning of change can be imputed from the studies conducted. Accounting change in the conventional view is seen ‘in terms of organizational reform and improvement’ (Hopwood, 1987, p.209), i.e., the introduction of new accounting techniques in order to obtain better, or, that enable managers to make better (“rational, maximising”) decisions.

There are also researchers who have conceptualised change more broadly. Their view is that accounting is a practice in motion (Hopwood, 1987). Such research, rather than accepting its technical rationality, probes the wider organizational and social origins of accounting. In so doing, researchers have attempted to understand the variety of organizational pressures, forces and rationales “that put accounting into motion and the ways in which the accounting craft becomes intertwined with organizational and social action” (Hopwood, 1987)‡.

From this perspective, accounting change depends on its interactions with other factors inside and outside the organization, such as other organizational practices, the social and external environment or changes in regulation (Hopwood, 1987). For this reason, change is not only conceptualised as: the introduction of new techniques, methods or procedures, but also by reference to the way accounting information is being used in organizations (Scapens et al., 2003). Moreover, conceptualisations refer to other changes, such as, the changes in who ‘does’ the accounting, the role of accountants and the change in attitudes towards the same accounting information and techniques (Abdul Khalid, 2000).

Following the above, this will allow the researcher to accommodate the various conceptualisations of change. Arguable, this is more reflective of organizational reality (Hopwood, 1987; Scapens et al., 2003), whereby change can be viewed as not only a alternation to procedures, but also as alternation to the day-to-day practices, procedures, activities, attitudes, roles and responsibilities of the members of the organization.

Having now explained the various views on change adopted in the literature, the next section describes two dominant theoretical perspectives of organizational change,

‡ When seen in such a term, [Accounting] is not a passive instrument of technical administration, a neutral means for merely revealing the pregiven aspects of organizational functioning. Instead its origins are seen to reside in the exercising of social power both within and without the organization (Hopwood, 1987, p.213).
namely; the planned approach; and, the emergent (processual) approach. Following these descriptions, an argument will be made for a need for the adoption of the processual approach in studying MA change.

IV. TWO DOMINANT PERSPECTIVES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The two dominant perspectives on organizational change are planned change and emergent (or processual) change. The planned approach to change is based on the pioneering work of Kurt Lewin (1958) and has dominated the theory and practice of change management for the past fifty years. The approach views organizational change as essentially a process of moving from one fixed state to another through a series of predictable and pre-planned steps (Burnes, 1996). In attempting to elaborate upon Lewin’s Three-step model: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing, writers such as Lippitt et al. (1958) and Cummings and Huse (1989) developed models with further phases. However, as Cummings and Huse indicate, “the concept of planned change implies that an organization exists in different states at different times and that planned movement can occur from one state to another” (1989, p.51).

The planned change approach is relatively well developed and understood and is supported by a coherent body of literature, methods and techniques. However, despite the large body of literature devoted to expanding this model of change, as Burnes and Salauroo (1995) state, there are those who question not only particular aspects of the planned approach to change but also its utility and practicality as a whole. The main charges levelled against it are as follows:

1) It is based on the assumption that, ‘an organization exists in different states at different times and that planned movement can occur from one state to another’ (Cummings and Huse, 1989, p.51). However, many writers argue that, in today’s turbulent and chaotic world, such assumptions are becoming increasingly tenuous. They argue that organisational change is more of a continuous and open-ended process than a set of discrete and self-contained events (Garvin, 1993; Stacey, 1993; Burnes, 2000).

2) It is criticised for its emphasis on incremental and isolated change and its inability to incorporate radical, transformational change (Miller and Friesen, 1984; Schein, 1985; Harris, 1985; Dunphy and Stace, 1993).

3) It implies that all the parties involved in a particular change project have a willingness and interest in being involved, so that a common agreement can be reached. This assumption appears to ignore organisational conflict and politics, or at least assumes they can be easily identified and resolved. Such a view is, however difficult to sustain in the light of findings of pyramids of studies

‡‡ Unfreezing involves reducing those forces maintaining the organization’s behaviour at its present and requires some form of confrontation meeting or re-education process for those involved. Having analysed the present situation, identified alternatives and selected the most appropriate action, action is then necessary to move to the more desirable state of affairs. Refreezing, in the final stage, seeks to stabilise the organization are a new state of equilibrium in order to ensure that the new ways of working are relatively safe from regression (see Burnes, 2000, p.271).

§§ For more on these criticisms see Burnes 1996, 2000.
explaining the role of power, politics and vested interests in organizational change in literature*** (Dunphy and Stace, 1993; Burnes, 1996, 2000).

4) It suggests that only one type of approach to change is appropriate for all organisations and all situations and at all times. Dunphy and Stace, however, point out that: “Turbulent times demand different responses in varied circumstances” (1993, p.905).

5) A further criticism is on its managerialistic view. For example, Wilson (1992) argues that, by attempting to lay down timetables, objectives and methods in advance, the planned approach is too heavily reliant on the role of managers. Furthermore, it assumes (perhaps rashly) that managers can have a full understanding of the consequences of their actions and that their plans will be understood and accepted and can be implemented (Burnes, 1996, 2000).

Although the proponents of planned change argue that these criticisms are not valid (Cummings and Huse, 1989; McLennan, 1989; Mirvis, 1990; French and Bell, 1995), an alternative perspective of change has been gaining ground in recent years. The field of organization studies has now seen a growing interest in research that pays attention to the classical issue of time as theoretically important aspect to understand social action in general, and management and organizations in particular (e.g., Whipp and Clark, 1986; Whipp, 1987; Bluedorn and Denhardt, 1988; Hinings and Greenwood, 1988; Huber et al, 1990; Van de Ven and Poole, 1990; Hunt, 1991; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991; Huber and Glick, 1993; Gersick, 1994; Adam, 1995; Ropo et al., 1997). This new perspective has been given a number of different labels, such as continuous improvement or organisational learning; however, it is more often referred to as the ‘emergent’ (Wilson, 1992; Mabey and Mayon-White, 1993) or ‘processual’ (Dawson, 1994; Soin et al., 2002) approach towards change.

The emergent or processual approach is a relatively new concept that came to the fore in the 1980s. The driving assumption behind the process thinking is that social reality is not a steady state. It is a dynamic and active process which occurs rather than merely exists (Sztompka, 1991). Human conduct is perpetually in a process of becoming. From this viewpoint, therefore, the overriding aim of the process analyst is to catch this reality in flight (Pettigrew, 1997, p.338). The approach starts from the assumption that change is a continuous, open-ended and unpredictable process of aligning and realigning an organization to its changing environment. Advocates of this approach argue that those who believe that organisational change can successfully be achieved through a pre-planned and centrally directed process of ‘unfreezing’, ‘moving’ and ‘refreezing’ ignore the complex and dynamic nature of internal practices and external conditions (Wilson, 1992; Dawson, 1994; Burnes, 2000). These processualists argue that the language of states (‘unfreezing’, ‘moving’ and ‘refreezing’) “is superseded by an active language of becoming, emerging, developing, transforming, and decaying” (Pettigrew, 1997, p.338). They acknowledge “the looming presence of the heavy hand of the past” (Pettigrew, 1997, p.341) and admit that human “actions are embedded in contexts which limit their information, insight and influence” (Pettigrew, 1997, p.338).

The processual approach places emphasis on the developing and unpredictable

*** It also ignores situations where more directive approaches may be required, such as when a crisis requiring rapid and major change does not allow scope for widespread involvement or consultation (Dunphy and Stace, 1993).
nature of change. It views change as a process that unfolds through the interplay of multiple variables (context, political processes and consultation) within an organisation. In contrast to the pre-ordained certainty of planned change, Dawson (1994), in particular, adopts a processual approach to change. He argues that this approach, in particular, is less prescriptive, more analytical and better able to achieve a broader understanding of the problems and practice of managing change within a complex environment.

Advocates of the concept of processual change who adopt this processual view of change tend to stress that there can be no simple prescription for managing organisational transitions successfully, owing to temporal and contextual factors, or owing to time pressures and situational variables (Burnes, 2000). Also, change cannot be characterised ‘as a rational series of decision-making activities and events ... nor as a single reaction to adverse contingent circumstances’ (Dawson, 1994, p.181). Therefore, successful change is less dependent on detailed plans and projections than on reaching an understanding of the complexity of the issues concerned and identifying the range of available options (Burnes, 1996, 2000).

Processualists believe that power, politics and culture play a pivotal role in the process of organizational change (Pettigrew, 1987; Burnes, 2000). This is a major point of departure between them and proponents of planned approach. In commenting on the failure to incorporate the political and cultural nature of change into the traditional and more prescriptive literature on change, some writers argue that this ‘aversion’ to discussing power, politics and culture has restricted our understanding of change and impeded our ability to manage it effectively (see Wilson, 1992; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1993; Dawson, 1994; Hardy, 1996; Burnes, 1996, 2000).

For some writers, it is the uncertainty and complexity of the environmental factors (extra-organizational level) which makes planned change inappropriate and processual change more pertinent (see McCalman and Paton, 1992). In the same vein, Clarke (1994) argues that an organisation’s survival and growth depends on identifying environmental changes quickly, and responding to them properly. However, as Benjamin and Mabey maintain:

[...] while the primary stimulus for change remains those forces in the external environment, the primary motivator for how change is accomplished resides with the people within the organization (1993, p.181).

Accommodating both intra- and extra-organizational factors, Pettigrew (1995) advocates a contextualist analysis. This is an approach that offers both multi-level or vertical analysis and processual or horizontal analysis. He explains the approach as follows:

A contextualist analysis of a process such as change draws on phenomena at vertical and horizontal levels of analysis and the interconnections between those levels through time. The vertical level refers to the interdependence between higher or lower levels of analysis upon phenomena to be explained at some further levels, for example the impact of a changing socio-economic context on features or intraorganizational context and interest group behavior. The horizontal level refers to the sequential
interconnectedness among phenomena in historical, present, and future time. An approach that offers both multilevel or vertical analysis and processual, or horizontal, analysis is said to be contextualist in character (1995, p.94).

The supporters of the processual view state that to cope with the complexity of change and achieve successful organizational change, we should promote extensive and deep understanding of the role of extra- and intra-organizational factors prior to and within the process of implementing a change. This involves exploring the full range of external variables, including the economy, suppliers, technology, and social trends, markets and customers, shareholders, parent companies, legal requirements,… (McCalman and Paton, 1992) and internal variables, including strategy, structure, systems, people and their influence, culture and style, and how these can function either as sources of inertia that can block change, or alternatively, as levers to encourage an effective change process (Wilson, 1992; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1993; Dawson, 1994; Burnes, 1996, 2000).

V. A PROCESSUAL APPROACH††† TO STUDYING MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTING CHANGE

Calls made to study the processes of change; normally through longitudinal case studies, also appeared in recent MA research (Hopwood, 1987; Burns, 2000; Collier, 2001; Scapens and Bromwich, 2001). The use of theoretical approaches in MA research has to some extent mirrored that of the organizational theorists. As such, those taking a functionalist and technical view of accounting change have attracted the same kind of criticism as described above (see Hopwood, 1983, 1987; Miller, 1994; Covaleski et al., 1996).

One of the main criticisms is that a functionalist view of accounting change provides only a limited understanding of the process and its consequences. On a similar note, an increasing number of writers argue that “little is known about the processes of accounting change” (Hopwood, 1987, p.207; see also Quattrone and Hopper, 2001), that is about the forces that either influence accounting change or help to shape the different forms of accounting and the consequences of such change (see Libby and Waterhouse, 1996 and Hopwood, 1987, p.207). Libby and Waterhouse (1996) argue that not much is known about the forces that induce or act to impede change in accounting practice or about the processes of change at the organization specific level, that is the micro processes of change (Innes and Mitchell, 1990);. As Burns states:

[][... while the research to date is to be commended for exposing the extent of accounting change at an organisational and/or (international) level, minimal attention has been devoted specifically to understanding and explaining why and how accounting evolves in the manner that it does, through time, and within specific organisational settings (1999, p 4). (emphasis in original)]

††† In some organizational and management accounting studies, the term “contextualist approach” is used. So, the terms “processual approach” and “contextualist approach” are interchangeable.
A processual approach examines the processes of MA change within their historical and organisational context. MA change is regarded as a continuous process that unfolds through the interplay of multiple variables within and outside of organizations. The key assumption is that MA change cannot be considered as a series of linear events (Baxter and Chua, 2003) within a given period of time. Baxter and Chua state that the nature of MA change is “unpredictable, non-linear and socially-embedded” (2003, p.97). Thus, there are no fixed outcomes of MA change under a given system, simply outcomes at particular moments in time (Burns, 2000).

Therefore, there is an acknowledgment of the significance of adopting a processual approach which, it is argued, provides a broader understanding of the problem and practice of MA change within a complex environment (Soi et al., 2002). However, the processual approach does not use a specific theoretical insight (Abdul Khalid, 2000). Abdul Khalid (2000) concludes that the processual approach in studies of organizations only provides general issues and specific time frames to be used in the study of organizational change.

The processual approach to the study of accounting change has important implications for MA researchers as it “moves them into the form of holistic explanation which is the apotheosis of the processual paradigm” (Pettigrew, 1997, p.340). In holistic explanation causation is neither linear or singular. Therefore, the search is not for final causes or single grand theories, rather the pursuit is for multiple intersecting conditions which link features of context and process to certain outcomes (Tilly, 1984; Ragin, 1987; Pettigrew, 1997). In particular, by exploring holistic explanations and understanding the dynamics of (organization-specific) processes of change, the researchers will be better positioned to examine how certain factors at extra- and intra- organizational levels influence change in MA practices. This analysis helps understanding how outer and inner contexts surrounding firm level processes shape the dynamic of MA change. Explaining these contexts, Pettigrew (1997) states that outer context includes factors such as the economic, social, political, competitive and sectoral environments in which the firm is located. However, in contrast with this higher level of analysis, inner context refers to the lower levels of analysis and examines the inner mosaic of the firm; the structural, cultural and political environments which shape features of the process of change within a firm. Thus, explanations of the changing MA practices are linked to both higher and lower levels of analysis.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper concludes that owing to the complex nature of change, we need to adopt a processual approach which can be defined more fully as the dynamic study of behaviour in organisations, focusing on organisational contexts (both outer an inner), sequences of incidents, activities and actions which unfold over time (Van de Ven, 1992; Pettigrew, 1992; Ferlie and McNulty, 1997). Thus the aim is not to produce a

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§§§ Sztompka (1993) raises an interesting point. He argues that some processes of change may be linear, directional, cumulative and perhaps irreversible, while others “non-linear, radical and transformational. However, he stresses that openness to these possibilities is a key intellectual requirement for the process scholar” (see also Pettigrew, 1997, p.339).

*** However, Pettigrew (1997, p.339) emphasis that “few process scholars enter the field with an empty head waiting to be filled with evidence”.
case history (as historians and storytellers do) but a case study which “goes beyond the case history in attempting a range of analytical purposes” (Pettigrew, 1997, p.339). Therefore it provides a more extensive and deeper understanding of extra- and intra-organizational factors that are likely to impinge on the processes of change, or lack of change, in MA systems and practices.

Processual studies of accounting have important implications both for researchers and practitioners of accounting. In particular, through understanding the dynamics of (organisation-specific) processes of change, managers will be better positioned to influence the path of change programmes within their own organisations, as well as anticipate potential problems along the way (Burns, 2000, p.568).

However, despite its strengths and virtues (as characterised above), processual approach, like all forms of social research, has its weaknesses and limitations. Amongst other criticisms, the approach is said to be time consuming, costly and normally, as Pettigrew (1997) points out, there is a missed opportunity to see the much wider terrain in which normally limited set of cases under study are located.

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